It's Junior Johnson Country

Piedmont Region of North Carolina: Headwaters of American Stock Car Racing

BY SHAV GLICK
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WILKES COUNTY, N.C.—Beneath thick stands of Carolina pine, past the sheds where the coon dogs howl, a brook flows out of the Brushy Mountains and forms a refreshing coolness to the meadows of Ingle Hollow.

The brook is nameless.

"It's jest a little ol' stream," says the owner of the meadows. "Don't recall its ever havin' a name or nuthin'."

The brook deserves better. It and hundreds of other rivulets draining the Piedmont region of North Carolina should have historical markers that read:

"Here Lie the Headwaters of American Stock Car Racing."

For it was the water from these streams that went into the stiles that made the whiskey that made the money to buy the cars that carried the whiskey. And it was the cars that carried the whiskey that the Good Ol' Boys raced Sunday in vacant fields that caused Bill France to build his big ovals where the cars could race in front of paying people that made millionaires out of fearless Carolina boys from funny-sounding hamlets like Randleman, Timnorsville, Spartanburg and Ellerbe.

One stream in particular—the one that forms Ingle Hollow in northwestern North Carolina—is special. It's a sort of link between the shadowy bootleg beginnings of stock car racing in the 1930s and the multimillion-dollar industry of today.

To reach it you take route 421 out of Winston-Salem west toward North Wilkesboro, turn off a narrow, two-lane road that drops through hemlock and spruce and dogwood, past chicken hutchcs and Pardue's Grocery until you make a turn in the road and see a stately two-level brick house, its drive-way defined by a neat brick fence.

The mailbox identifies the resident: Junior Johnson.

Maps call it the Piedmont, Or Wilkes County. The mailing address is Randleman, N.C. But to the folks from miles around it's Junior Johnson Country.

"I'll tell you, that stream's made as much as any stream in the world," says Johnson, a second-generation bootlegger turned race car driver turned race car owner and builder. "That's the secret right there, runnin' clear and nice like that. That stream's responsible for all this." He waved his hand toward the house, the racing complex where he can build a race car for Cale Yarbrough from the floor up without leaving the premises, and the buildings where 92,000 tryers are being fattened for sale.

JUNIOR AND 'THE BOSS'—Junior Johnson holds pride of Johnson household named Cricket. Last year, Cricket was dognapped and Johnson paid $1,000 in ransom.

Photo by Harold Hagan

It was along the winding roads beside the creek that Johnson perfected his famous "boobleg turn" to avoid roadblocks thrown up by alcohol tax agents, better known as "revenouns." Johnson, rolling along a country lane at 80 m.p.h. with a load of half-gallon fruit jugs filled with white lightning, would jam his gear into second, cock the wheels, stomp on the accelerator and spin the car 180 degrees. He'd be off in the opposite direction before the agents got the dust out of their eyes.

Junior Johnson builds and owns the cars Yarbrough drove to the Winston Cup championship the past two years in NASCAR, the most successful racing body in the world. He is also the crew chief, engine man and boss of the operation. When Yarbrough pits for a tire change—one of the most critical moments in a stock car race—Johnson mans the jack.

"Ain't nuthin' too small to do right," he says, "and ain't no use havin' somebody else flangin' the jack."

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Turner, Fireball Roberts, Little Joe Weatherly and Tim and Fordy Flock, he unhesitatingly takes today's driver as better. Or perhaps it should be today's combination.

"Drivers today are more tied up in their cars, more sensitive to the way they run, in other words they're more interested in what you're doing to them and they stay closer to their cars. Course, today's cars can cost you sixty thousand for a good one. But if you were driving, you could get a real competitive ride for four or five thousand. I had cars that won that didn't have more than that in 'em.'

Jr. gave up bootlegging and auto racing about the same time, for different reasons.

Fasting: "I made him quit," says Piosio. "I still worry though once in a while. But we get along with one of the drivers. He tells 'em if they don't do what he wants he'll take that car out and show 'em how it's supposed to be done. He could, too. I worry some, too, when I read about David (Pearsall) winning another race. You know he's older Junior if he told the truth about when he was born."

Pearson is listed in the NASCAR Guide as 43.

Bootlegging: "They put a five-thousand-dollar bounty on me," says Junior. "Now folks around these here parts are mighty loyal but the... five-thousand dollars would be awful tempting to some folks. I decided I'd better quit before someone tapped me."

Carolina liquor stores are stocked with the same brands you can buy anywhere else but bootlegging is still a way of life here. While Johnson was talking racing with a reporter in his garage, a friend dropped in and took Junior aside.

"Ol' boy got picked up hauling white lightning while we're down at Daytona," Johnson explained later. "Wanted to know if I knew how the Johnsons' went those tough days. Year and a day if you get caught."

His racing days over, Johnson turned to building cars.
LAND OF FAST CARS, GOOD LIKKER

Continued from 14th Page and racing them with hired drivers.

"I like to have my own cars when I was driving. Did most of my work up at Holly Farms (about 15 miles away) until I got to the point where I needed another fa-

Johnson's garage complex—featuring individual rooms for fabricating, chassis engineering, body work, engines, maintenance, painting, etc.—is not visible from the main-

Johnson: "The original building used to be over yonder where that thermometer's on the wall to where you're standing (about 3 feet square). That's all there was to it. That's where I worked on the cars, motors, ever-

"First thing you know I had myself a parts business. Had to build a building down by the road to keep customers from running all over my place."

"Here's a guy with about a fifth-grade education and engineers at General Motors come down here and talk to him about what's wrong with their engines, or how to make 'em better," said Ralph Seagraves, head of the Win-

"That's where I was raised. And my daddy, too. The old white frame house is torn down now and a new brick one built in its place. I got a first cousin lives in my uncle's old place. He up the hill a bit and don't keep somebody living in an old place it'll just fall down.

Three generations of Johnsons have been reared in Wilkes County. Robert Glenn Johnson Sr., was born just a
dug on where Junior and Flossie live today with Ju-

"The old family home was beyond that patch of pine," said Junior, pointing across the stream to the other side of Ingle Hollow. "Right there's where I was raised. And my
daddy, too. The old white frame house is torn down now and a new brick one built in its place. I got a first cousin lives in my uncle's old place. Back up the hill a bit and don't keep somebody living in an old place it'll just fall down.

"The heirs own all the land as far as you kin see. I'd hate to have to figure out which ones own which but it doesn't make much difference as long as it's all family."

When Junior's not fixing an engine, going to a race, feeding the chickens, slinging bacon or grading his

"We got about 15 room dogs. Keep 'em right down here by the stream. See that one over there? Got offered $3,000 for him while back. I don't get out as much as I'd like but we like the dogs to run every night if they can. There's tons fellow in these parts can't afford their own dogs but like to hunt so we let 'em borrow ours. They do us a favor by runnin' the dogs and themselves a favor, too."

The pride of the Johnson household is the heaviest-liked dog named Cricket. Last year Cricket was dolled up outside of the Johnson's car and Junior posted—and paid—a $1,000 re-

"He's jest a little old mutt (pronounced mah-ut) but he's the boss," said Junior.

If so, he's boss of a million-dollar racing operation in a remote corner of the Carolinas that "jest grew" from a brook in Ingle Hollow where Cricket goes to have a cool drink every day.

race conditions. If it lives here it's definitely going to last on the race track. We really wring 'em out."

Many in the racing fraternity believe it is Johnson's spe-
cial touch with engines that enables him to field winning

cars for Yorkaborugh—and before him for Bobby Isaac, Da-
el Dieringer, Lee Roy Yorkaborugh, Charlie Glotzbach and Bobby Allison.

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The Johnsons have no children, but just about all the kids hereabouts might as well be theirs. On all of their
cross-country trips to Riverside and Ontario Junior pulls his trucks with cars, equipment—and neighborhood
children—and drives off to the races.

Trophies for winning races as a driver, car owner and mec-
nanic, for coon hunting—and memosents from the motion
picture "Last American Hero" about his life—fill the family trophy room. The biggest, about eight feet tall, was made by children from a nearby elementary school. "They had a Junior Johnson Day and every class had something about Junior," said Flossie. "I tell you I was laughin' and cryin' all day long."

Nearly all the food eaten on the Johnson compound is homegrown. There is enough meat hanging in Junior's meat locker to stock a butcher shop. One day he brought a bacon slicer and had so much fun playing with it he and Flossie sliced enough meat to take some to all their friends.

"Wantsn't but a couple days before they were calling back and askin' if we had any more of that bacon," Junior said with a grin. "If I'da had I'da cut it up in the first place."